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AUTHOR Simek, Thomas S.: And Others .
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ABSTRACT

Project PISCES (a Pilot Infusion System for Career Experiential Studies) combines curriculum and work experience components to meet the vocational education needs of emotionally disturbed and learning disabled students in Montgomery County (Pennsylvania) Unit No. 23. Core elements of Project PISCES include a curriculum which focuses on self awareness, career awareness, decision making, education awareness, vocational skill identification, and employability skills: a community resource guide: inservice training for special and regular education teachers, administrators, parents, and employers: and a monitored supportive career-oriented work study program. A fundamental criterion for placement in the program is that vocational school enrollment is not a viable alternative for the student. The work experience component of the project stresses communication between employer, teacher, project director, field director, interdisciplinary team, and parents. (SBH)

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PROJECT PISCES: Career Education Curriculum and Work Experience for Secondary Emotionally Disturbed/Learning Disabled Students. (Portion of a paper presented to the 58th Informational CEC Convention, April 25, 1980.)

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Thomas S. Simek
Director, Project PISCES
Montgomery County Intermediate Unit #23

Rochelle Poyourow
Field Director, Project PISCES
Montgomery County Intermediate Unit #23

Marcia Marchek
Curriculum Specialist, Project PISCES
Montgomery County Intermediate Unit #23

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Thomas S. Simek

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AN OVERVIEW:

Project PISCES (A Pilot Infusion System for Career Experiential Studies) became a reality on August 15, 1978. Funding for the project was made available by an ESEA Title IV-C competitive grant. Students involved in the Project were referred from programs operated by the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit #23, Pennsylvania.

In a period of time when mortgage rates are skyrocketing, the economy is erratic, credit rates are rising and their accessibility being limited and the overall job market is unstable, everyone is concerned about "making ends meet." These economic realities are further compounded for the special education student entering the job market whose past history most often included components of extreme frustration, explosiveness, poor social relationships and a variety of learning disabilities. Students, parents, teachers, employers and administrators have been made rudely aware of the deficits in our educational system. This system has not been able to satisfy the needs of those youngsters who could not benefit from traditional education, need more than what special education programs can offer and who cannot grasp either the concepts or the practicum of a vocational education program. Built into Project PISCES is the concept that successful components of various programs could be tapped and modified to meet the specific needs of each PISCES student.

Core elements of Project PISCES include:

1. a curriculum specifically designed to focus on the topical areas of:
   a. self awareness, b. career awareness, c. decision making, d. education awareness, e. vocational skill identification and f. employability skills.

2. a Community Resource Guide - acknowledging the wealth of community support i.e. sources and individuals.

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3. in-service training programs for special education and regular education teachers, administrators, parents and employers and

4. a monitored supportive career-oriented work-study program.

Initially identified by a team consisting of the teacher, aide, instructional advisor, social worker, psychiatrist/clinical psychologist and supervisor, a student is referred for possible PISCES inclusion. Though one student in a given classroom may be identified as a Project PISCES work experience candidate, the entire class is exposed to the experiential education curriculum. This not only exposes numerous other students to job realities but also adds support to the student on the job. Students are taught to evaluate their strengths and limitations in relation to the world of work and then to test their findings, and apply their newly acquired knowledge and experiences within a supportive work environment.

As a true student support system, the teacher relies for example on the Field Director to identify job related strengths and weaknesses in both academic and emotional/social areas that may need additional remediation and support. The Field Director, in turn, relies on the employer to assist in conveying general work attitudes and specific skills necessary for job inclusion and direct input into the curriculum and experiences of the students. Students' parents are encouraged to become involved in educational and employment decisions and also to contribute to the student support system. Further guidance and support comes from the team working with the students and the advisory council, which is representative of all the above mentioned groups. The advisory council and the Community Resource Guide focuses the curriculum and employment opportunities in the direction of the inquiring student.

THE CURRICULUM:

Often additional classroom pressures and responsibilities unrelated to direct teaching have intruded upon teacher preparation time. The PISCES Experiential Education curriculum is designed to help ameliorate the problem of lessened teacher preparation time in several ways. The curriculum adapts easily to the writing of Individualized Education Programs. The teacher is supplied with ready-made curriculum materials and student activities, and a system for measuring student achievement is incorporated into the evaluation process.

The objectives to be achieved and the principles to be taught are presented in a sequential manner thus enabling both the teacher and student to logically build on the topical areas of the curriculum. Uniquely, both the objective statements and the principle statements need only slight modification to meet the requirements of the Individualized Education Program. An example might read as follows:

CURRICULUM OBJECTIVE (ex) To identify job requirements	ANNUAL GOAL (ex) The student will identify job requirements
PRINCIPLE TO BE TAUGHT (ex) A job may require union membership	SHORT TERM GOAL (ex) The student will investigate jobs that require union membership

The ready-made curriculum materials include prepared ditto masters that introduce vocabulary terms, reading hand-outs which present clear, up-to-date career and/or job related facts in story form, response sheets which measure that which the student has learned and additional activity sheets that reinforce difficult but vital career-oriented concepts. Pupil activities are designed to meet the individual needs of the students. Some activities are teacher directed, some are student organized and directed, and still others are independent activities. Discussions concerning the information found on the reading handouts can be teacher directed, while role-playing and video taping activities can be student organized and directed. Activities such as collecting information by phone concerning job requirements can be an independent activity.

Teacher evaluation varies according to the ability of the student and the difficulty of the task. For the most part, the measurement of student achievement is based on 80% accuracy. Situations can render any percentage rating meaningless if, for example, a student successfully completes a job application form except for filling in his name. He has fulfilled the 80% accuracy requirement but without a name the application is worthless.

Fieldtrips and Community Resource speakers are scheduled intermittently throughout the curriculum and correspond to the Community Resource Guide. Specially designed ditto masters prepare the student prior to the fieldtrip or speaker's presentation in addition to helping him summarize and evaluate that which he has both seen and heard.

Other features of the curriculum include consistent dictionary skill development, infusion into content areas, a student notebook consisting of selected information to help the student during the years following his school experience, and an audio-visual guide which conveniently provides information on the accessibility of additional materials. The curriculum is written on a fourth grade level but because of certain necessary vocabulary related to careers and/or jobs, that level may appear somewhat higher.

Humor and drama in the curricular materials motivate and hold the interest of the student while steady doses of reality keep him in touch with the real world of work. An example is the story of Johnny Hazard who gets "turned on" because he doesn't wear rubber-soled shoes in a high voltage area. This one-liner captures the student's interest because of the term "turned on." In the story it is followed by a short yet concise explanation of rubber not being a conductor of electricity.

THE WORK EXPERIENCE COMPONENT:

Referrals of students for placement on jobs originate with the special education teacher in conjunction with the I.U. interdisciplinary team. Criteria for placement is flexible, coming from several avenues. This flexibility in determining both need and job readiness is a major factor contributing to the success of the PISCES model. One fundamental criterion in placement considerations, however, is that at the time of recommendation, vocational school enrollment is not a viable alternative for the student. Avenues for selection of students are:

A. As a vocational education goal.
Students are recommended for the work-experience after having had sufficient exposure to the PISCES career education curriculum to be considered "job ready" by the teacher. It is, in essence, a natural sequence of events, the student has "graduated" from classroom training and is ready to use those skills in actually participating in the world of work.

B. As a motivational tool.
Many students having learning and/or adjustment problems find little relevance in either special education or vocational education. This student may be referred to the PISCES program using the work-experience to motivate the student to remain in school by developing positive feelings of self-worth on their job and a belief in their ability to be productive and independent.

C. As a crisis intervention.
Students whose performance or behavior in either academic or vocational classes indicates that they are not benefiting from the current programming may be recommended for the work-experience component of Project PISCES. Often, a behavioral contract will be made using specific behavioral goals as a contingency for being recommended for a PISCES work-experience position. Students selected for the work-experience enjoy a special status in their classroom. Those who have "attained" recommendation feel proud of their achievement. Those who were referred in order to increase motivation feel bound to fulfill their obligations to the program (and thus to the school). The reason becomes apparent during observations of the students on their jobs and during informal discussions with them. These students love their jobs! Able to perform at their jobs adequately, they are reinforced by praise from their employer, PISCES staff, the supportive team and a paycheck.

Of extreme importance to the work experience component of Project PISCES is the flow of communication between employer, teacher, Project Director, Field Director, interdisciplinary team and parents. This student support system is a ring of respect and communication encircling the student. A break anywhere in the circle can result in a breakdown in student performance. With close communication, cooperation and sincere caring there appears to be no limit to what happens--student performance increases, teachers feel more fulfilled, employers are satisfied and parents feel better about their children and themselves.

Appropriate job matches are made for each student taking into account employment opportunities available within the geographical area accessible to the student, feasibility of the job for the particular student and the responsiveness of the employer to the program goals (i.e. hiring a special needs student and willingness to provide the extra time or training necessary to insure a successful placement). At this point in time, job leads for new student placements are being generated from PISCES employers themselves; either by requesting additional students at their business, making referrals to other branches of their company, or to associates or friends in their or neighboring communities. It appears that PISCES is fulfilling not only programming needs for certain students who did not quite fit into available programs, but also employment needs of the community. Recent availability of a Federal Tax Credit, PL 95-600, Targeted Jobs Tax Credit (TJTC) as an incentive for employers to hire students in a cooperative education program has been helpful in securing

job sites. Employers feel less reluctant to pay minimum wage to a student who most likely will require some modification or reduction of initial job tasks or a longer time for training. However, once the student is working, the financial benefits of the tax credit appear to diminish in importance as employers begin to develop a relationship with the student. This phenomena is evidenced by the high level of interest that so many employers are taking in their student-employees. The employers, having become a part of the student support system, are given recognition for their training responsibilities and due credit for the success of the students.

Jobs cannot be "saved" in all cases. Occasionally, students are fired, but that does not necessarily indicate failure for either the student or the supporting adults. Even when students have been fired, improvements in that student's maturity have been noted by teachers and/or parents. For many students Project PISCES provided their first job and possibly their first successful school-related experience. Youngsters who may have previously displayed disruptive behaviors and disrespectful attitudes towards teachers and other authoritative figures are respectful of their employer and able to accept criticism, follow instructions, get along with co-workers and be generally cooperative.

Project PISCES, as an exemplary program within the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit #23, has opened the door for many students who previously would have left school, become truant, or would have continued to experience extreme frustration. As an alternative it has been extremely successful for emotionally disturbed and learning disabled secondary students and has developed into an effective referral source utilized by the total community.

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